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'We thought of an A-bomb': *Titan explosion*

A Space Spy Gap

The Titan explosion

Living in the shadow of sprawling Vandenberg Air Force Base, residents of Lompoc, Calif., have become inured to rocket launches. Few were looking skyward last Friday morning when a giant Titan 34D rocket on a classified military mission exploded just five seconds after liftoff. "I heard a banging, but it wasn't really loud," said Alice DeArmas, who was working behind the counter at a nearby Jiffy-Mart. "Then we saw the cloud—white and orange on the bottom. The first thing we thought of was the A-bomb." It was the second failure of the rocket in as many launches: last August another Titan 34D, carrying a vital KH-11 spy satellite, was destroyed by ground controllers four minutes after liftoff because of massive problems with its liquid-fuel system. After the latest failure, the Air Force grounded its remaining six Titan 34D's until the causes of the launch failures could be identified. "That could take months and months," said Air Force spokesman Maj. Ron Rand.

The grounding of the Titan fleet, coupled with the Challenger tragedy, meant that America suddenly lacked the heavy-lift capacity to put large satellites safely into orbit. Intelligence sources described the latest space setback as a national-security disaster—one that could within a year leave the United States without any spy satellites to monitor Soviet military preparedness. According to some sources, the latest ill-fated Titan rocket was carrying the last of the KH-11 reconnaissance satellites. Another KH-11 is currently in polar orbit monitoring Soviet military activity, but under normal conditions its fuel for maneuvers will be exhausted by early next year, though experts say its life expectancy might be extended through 1987. But the Air Force had planned to have two KH-11s in orbit simultaneously. "We need them to keep track of what the Soviets are up to," said Michael Krepon, an arms-control expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. "Even when we have a full complement up there, there aren't enough to do everything that we want them to do."

Tight security means that it is far from certain that the last KH-11 was aboard the Titan. Some sources said that the payload was the Pentagon's latest global communications satellite. Even so, that would not significantly lessen the problem. The Air Force might still have its last KH-11, but no secure way to put it or any other critical military satellite into orbit.

Desperation ploy: Why is the United States down to just one aging eye in the sky to monitor the Soviet military buildup? The dilemma stems from NASA's insistence that the space shuttle would be used for all future satellite launches. The KH-11s were scheduled to begin to be replaced this year by the Air Force's far more sophisticated and heavier KH-12 satellites. But the Challenger explosion changed all that, since the Titan lacks the power to put a KH-12 into orbit. Last week's abortive Titan launch may have been a desperation ploy: the remaining KH-11 was an engineering test model retrofitted to replace the spy satellite destroyed last August.

The sudden spy-satellite shortage has led to speculation that the space shuttle might be prematurely forced back into service to meet the military's surveillance needs. But even in the best of circumstances, launching the KH-12 would be tricky. Such a launch would require unproven lighter filament-wound booster casings and throttle settings higher than the shuttle has ever used before. It would have been a high-risk operation at best—even before the Challenger tragedy. Now the United States may have to weigh the human risks of rushing the shuttle back into service against the national-security dangers of losing a sky window on the Soviet Union.

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